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Polish Literature – Returning to the European Fold

Ten Centuries of Polish Literature, the first volume in a series of specialist publications from the “Academy of the Humanities” Foundation, is a book of great import for ensuring that the presence of Polish humanistic thought is indeed felt in Europe – not only at European universities, but especially at the editorial offices of cultural newspapers and journals, as well as at secondary school libraries.

The synthetic study presented here, written in model fashion by a team of the best Polish researchers and specialists in the consecutive literary epochs, may serve as a guidebook for all those Europeans who are interested in Polish literature specifically as a constituent part of European literature. Let’s also go on to say that without this “constituent part,” no picture of European literature can be complete. Of course, it is not the case that prior to this book European readers did not have access to other studies of a synthetic nature, which strove to portray the whole panorama of European literature. However, a fundamental flaw of such studies – from the Polish standpoint – was that Polish literature was either absent from their pages entirely, or appeared there only in trace amounts or “in the shadow” of Russian literature.

What it is that binds, let’s say, German, French, Italian and also Polish literature together is a common cultural heritage, common roots, belonging to a single tradition. And so, we might view the literary history of every European country (thus that of Poland) through

the prism of the universal European values that emerged under the influence of ancient Greek and Roman achievements, the great religions and reform movements. Within this Mediterranean cultural domain radiating to Europe's far northern frontiers, various national literatures developed, yet regardless of the language they employed they always drew upon this universal canon of values. Polish literature, too, has for centuries been associated with this same domain of common values. Yet while absorbing them, Polish literature has itself enriched European literature by contributing new elements characteristic of the Polish milieu – a fact that has not always been adequately underscored in synthetic European studies. Kochanowski, Rej, Krasicki, Potocki, Krasiński, Słowacki, Mickiewicz, Norwid, Prus, Wyspiański, Witkacy, Schulz, Gombrowicz, Miłosz, Borowski, Szymborska, Mrozek, Lem, Herbert – these are authors who just simply cannot be left out of any synthesis of European literature. While remaining citizens of Europe, they brought new elements to Europe. Unfortunately, in many studies of the history of European literature, the Polish novel, Polish poetry, and Polish drama have been present to a marginal extent, if at all.

It seems that there is nowadays a particularly profound need for such a portrayal of the history of Polish literature, broken down into the traditional time periods, yet viewed from a perspective that readers from France, Germany, Italy, or Spain will find familiar – the perspective of those values that constitute the “European spirit.” Today's Europe, which is working to retrace its cultural foundations, drafting a new constitutional treaty, and striving to reunite what did once constitute a unity of common experience, yet became divided, this Europe engrossed in learning about its own “new” citizens is greatly in need of just such original studies, written with it specifically in mind. This book's great virtue indeed lies in the fact that it is not some sort of popular work already published in Poland, but rather a study planned and written with European readers firmly in mind – readers who want to learn about the European fiber of Polish literature, yet also about its originality.